



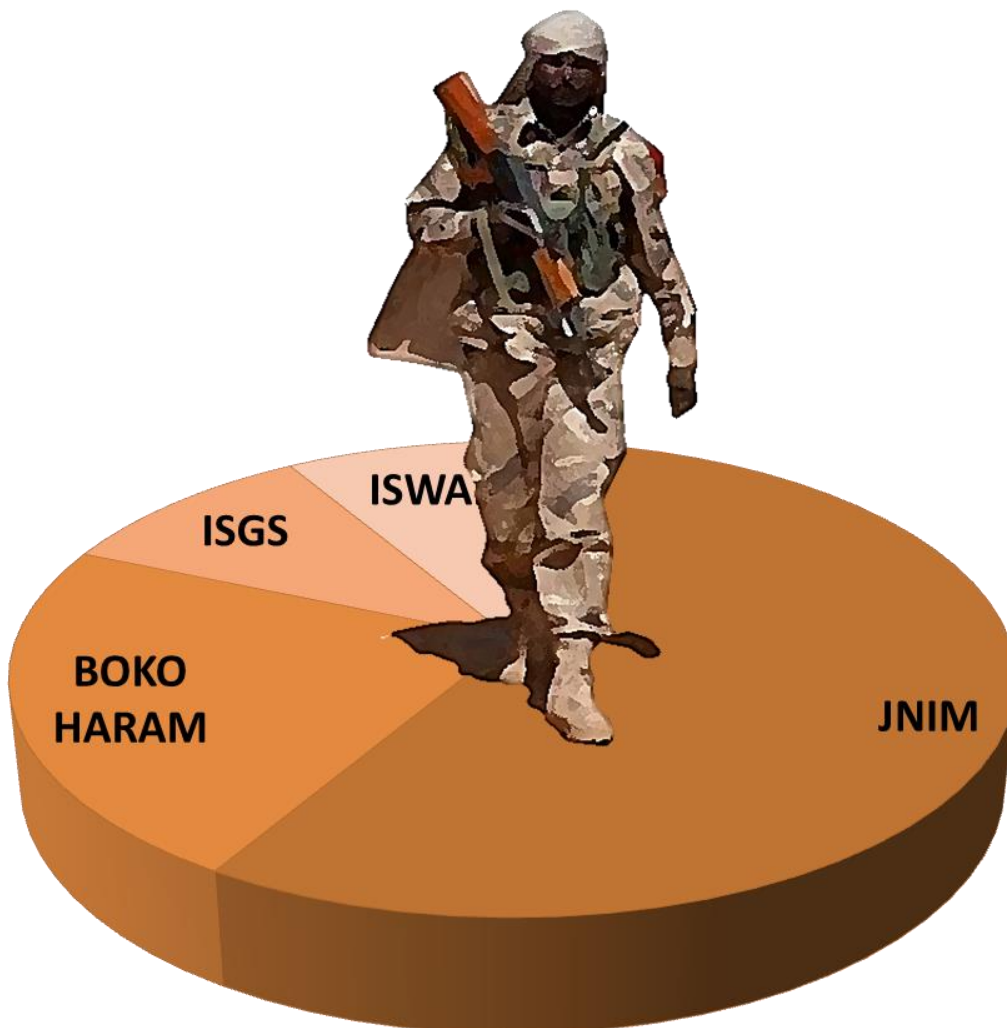
NATO Southern Hub

Transregional



2<sup>nd</sup> Joint NSD-S HUB & ACSRST Four-Monthly Report

# “Terrorism in the Sahel: facts and figures”



May 2019 – August 2020

**The NSD-S HUB was established at Allied Joint Force Command Naples in order to improve NATO awareness and understanding of the opportunities and challenges from the South, while contributing to the overall coordination of NATO activities and efforts.**

**The African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism (ACSRT) was established in 2004, as a structure of the African Union, to serve as its center of excellence for the analysis of terrorism related information and the CT Capacity Building of its Member States.**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

During the period of analysis, new trends became evident, both in terms of number of attacks and geographical areas, were evidenced. In this sense the following should be highlighted:

- Terrorism and Violent Extreme Organization (TVEOs) have slightly extended their areas of operations which could imply new changes of strategic and operational priorities.
- Disagreements between JNIM and the ISGS provoked clashes, following years of cohabitation and even cooperation, causing a decrease in their combat resources.
- Escalation of terrorism activities by using different Tactics, Techniques and Procedures (TTPs), in specific areas (most of the attacks have taken place in cross-border areas, affecting tri-border regions in many cases, or along main roads/near rivers).
- There is a risk TVEO activities will expand beyond the Sahel despite the increase in counter terrorism operations' effectiveness during the last four months.

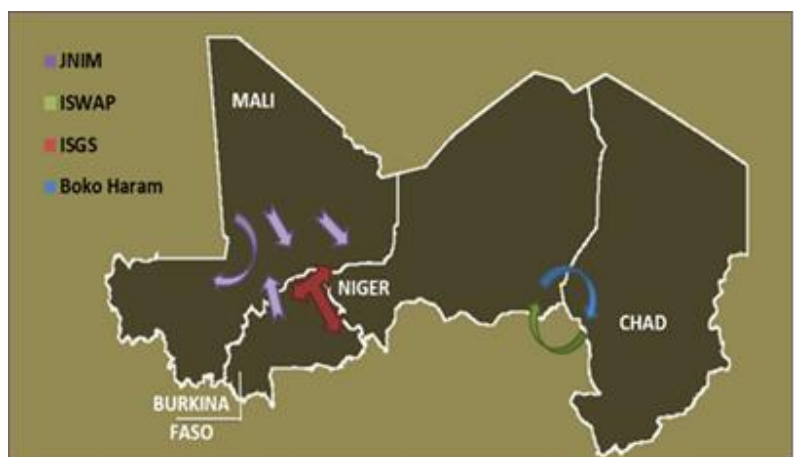
This report analyses the relevance of these new trends, including their causes and the TTPs involved. It underscores counter terrorism activities which seem to have been most effective.

The new scenario in both clusters (Liptako-Gourma region and Lake Chad basin), involving launching attacks in cross-border areas (acting in one territory to then retreat to another) has been hampering the legitimacy of the local Security Forces since it was not authorized to pursue terrorists across borders due to issues of sovereignty.

In this sense, the recent establishment of the Coalition for Sahel, which, on the military side, allows for better coordination between Operation Barkhane and G5 Sahel Joint Forces through a Joint Command Mechanism, seems to be obtaining promising results during the last months.

In addition to this, the systematic exploitation of communal violence by TVEOs enhances their recruitment capacity and weakens the legitimacy of national ASF, considered by the population, as unable to provide security for them.

Finally, new trends show the progressive TVEO “migration” to the south, which could potentially affect the Gulf of Guinea. If so, timely first reactions will be crucial to avoid TVEO assent in the area.



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## 1. INTRODUCTION

This second four-monthly joint report,<sup>1</sup> based on the statistical information drawn from terrorist attacks which occurred in G-5 area,<sup>2</sup> adds two new periods of study, 1 May - 31 August 2019 and 1 May – 31 Aug 2020, to our previous report.

By lengthening the period from 8 to 16 months, a broader and more nuanced understanding of the dynamics of terrorism over time has been achieved, demonstrating new TVEO<sup>3</sup> trends, capacity building and strategies in the G-5 Sahel region. Consequently, the deductions and conclusions will be more comprehensive and precise.

The analysts have used the information provided by ACLED's<sup>4</sup> database, then further filtered and refined with internal criteria from the NSD-S HUB ("the Hub") & African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism (ACSRT) and the results have been validated through peer review. The local and regional perspectives have provided a comprehensive vision of trends in terrorism by way of progressive analyses

As stated in the previous report, due to the many and complex root causes of this instability, purely numerical data gathered from the area of analysis may not adequately detail the effectiveness of any national/regional Fight Against Terrorism (FAT), either regarding the prevention of these incidents or the reduction in the capacity of terrorists to advance their agenda. It is for this reason that both quantitative and qualitative analyses have been adopted.

This report is complemented by an interactive dashboard which intends to provide the reader with a better understanding of TVEO attack evolution in the area of analysis, all of which is available on both the Hub and ACSRT websites. The scope of this report is strategic so it is not going further into operational/tactical details.

Finally, based on the feedback process following the release of the first four-monthly report, the Hub and ACSRT have modified this second report to incorporate the most relevant requests.

The period covered by the report (May 2019-August 2020) is divided as follows:

- Period A: May 2019- August 2019.
- Period B: September 2019-December 2019.
- Period C: January 2020- April 2020.
- Period D: May 2020-August 2020.

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<sup>1</sup> This document has been jointly produced by the African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism (ACSRT) of the African Union (AU) and the NATO Strategic Direction South - Hub (the Hub).

<sup>2</sup> G-5 Sahel Area: Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad.

<sup>3</sup> Based on their ideology and allegiances, two general categories of TVEOs can be identified in the G5 Sahel countries: those affiliated with al-Qaeda (AQ) and its subsidiary al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and those affiliated with the Islamic State (Daesh).

<sup>4</sup> Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED); [www.acleddata.com](http://www.acleddata.com).

## 2. NUMERICAL DATA – QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

### 2.1. Number of Terrorist Attacks

Figure 1: Terrorist attacks (May – Dec 2019)

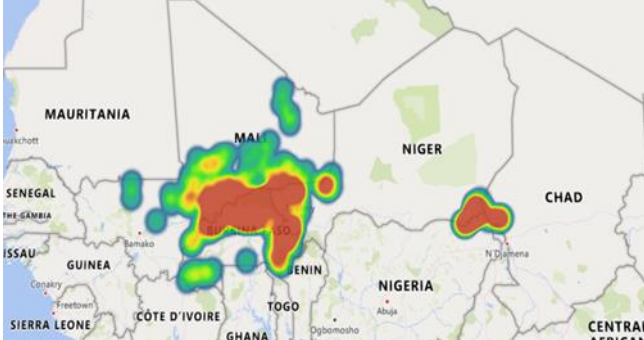
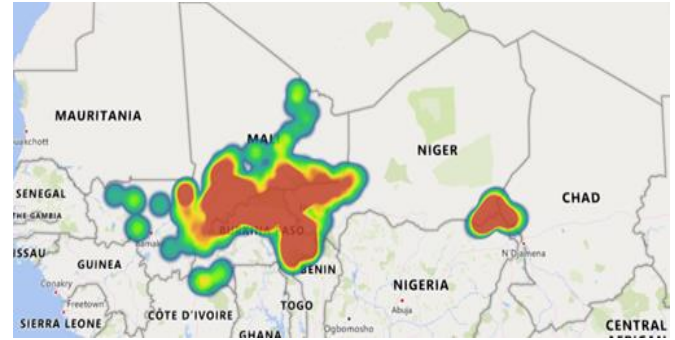
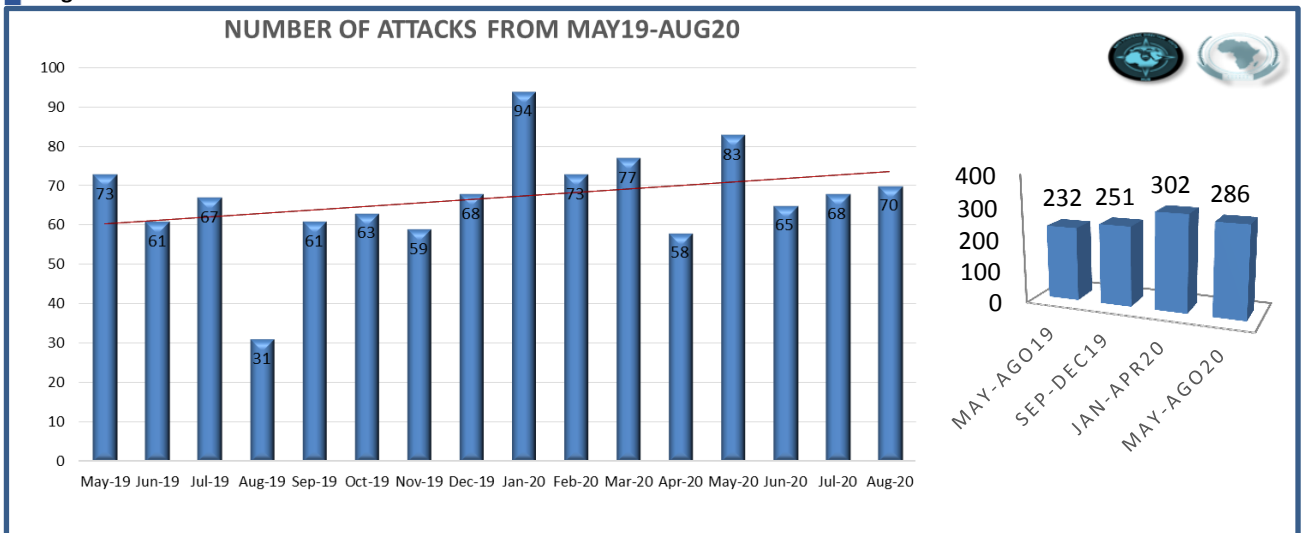


Figure 2: Terrorist attacks (Jan – Aug 2020)



Terrorist activity during the two 8-month periods (2019 and 2020) can be seen to have increased in 2020 with 105 more attacks (up 21.5%), with an average of 67 attacks per month. However, the first slight decrease was detected during the period D, reversing the rising trend. On the other hand, there was a marginal increase in number of attacks in the May/June/July period between 2019 and 2020 (201 in 2019 and 216 in 2020, an increase of just 9%) whereas comparing August 2019 to August 2020, there was an increase from 31 to 70 attacks (up 126%).

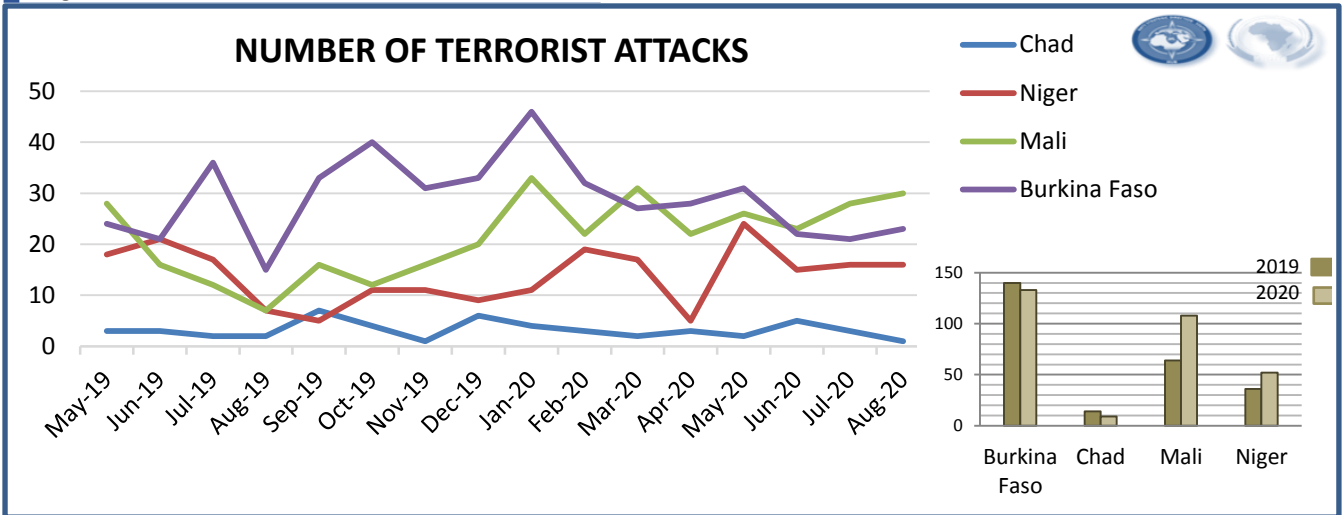
Figure 3



Breaking the number of attacks down on the basis of countries affected by the attacks (see figure 4) Burkina was the most affected with an average of 29 attacks per month, followed by Mali, Niger and Chad. For the period, there were no attacks recorded in Mauritania. During the final three months there was a notable decrease in attacks in Burkina Faso. While Burkina Faso and Chad

showed decreasing trends in 2020 (-5% and -36% respectively), there was an overall increase in number of attacks in Mali and Niger (+69% and +44% respectively) during period A/B and C/D.

Figure 4

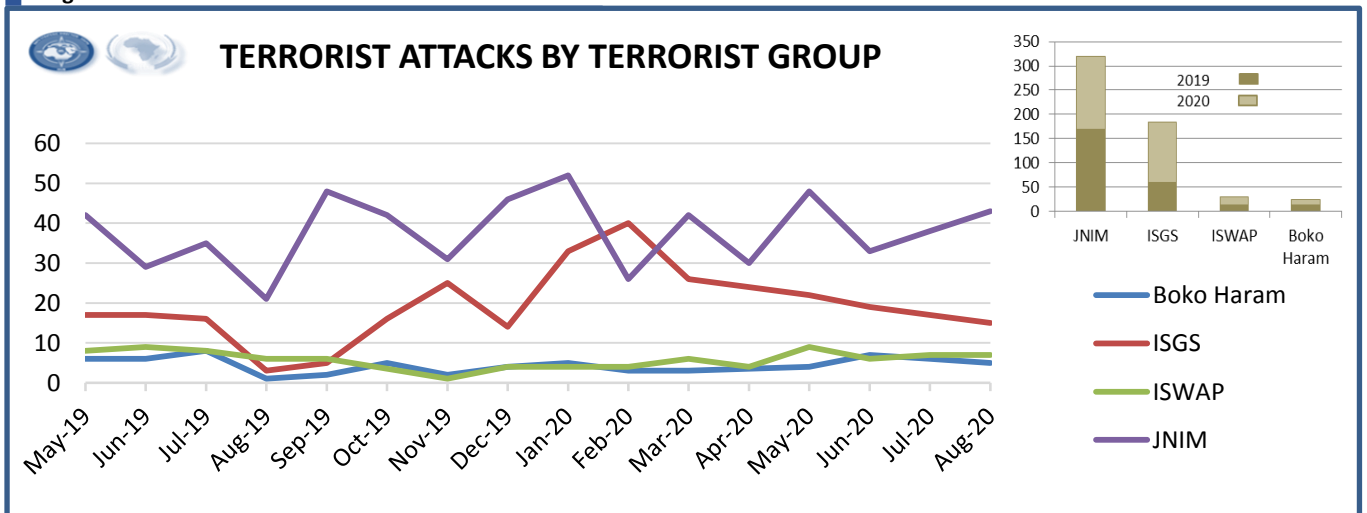


## 2.2. Terrorist Activity by Groups

With regards to the distribution of attacks by terrorist group (see figure 5), attacks attributed to ISGS have significantly decreased since February 2020, reversing its upward trend. JNIM remains the most active with an average of 38 attacks per month.

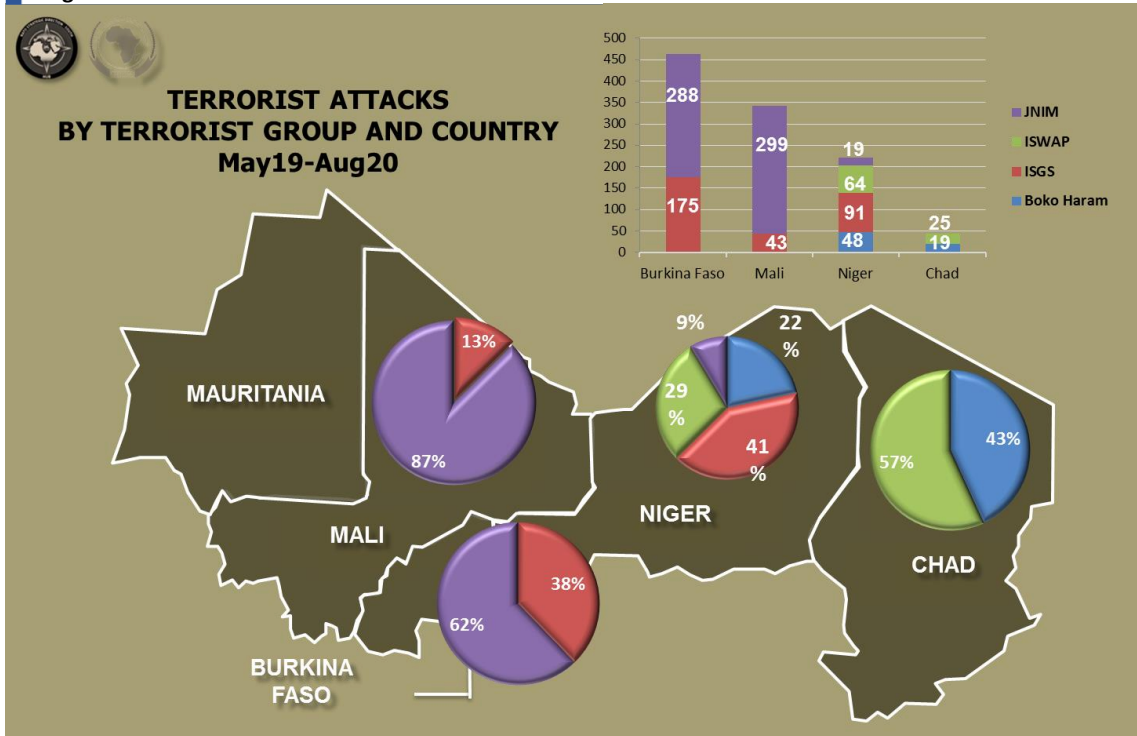
Finally, the activities of ISWAP and Boko Haram both followed similar trends: decreasing during the first quarter to then recover in the fourth quarter (up 100% and 71% respectively).

Figure 5



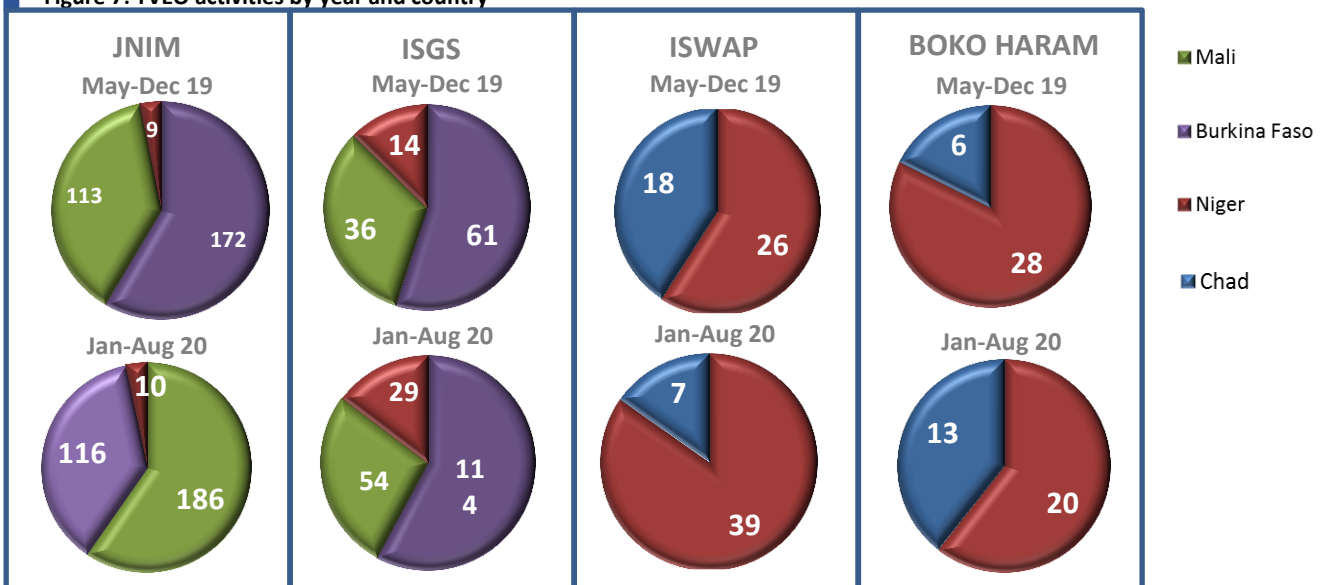
The following graphic (figure 6) shows terrorist group activity in each country in the period D. The increase in the number of attacks in Mali and Niger is noteworthy. ISGS significantly increased its activity in Niger (mainly in the western area) while JNIM was less active there.

Figure 6



In the final comparison (figure 7), it is clearly indicated that JNIM increased the number of attacks carried out in Mali, while decreasing significantly its activity in Burkina Faso and keeping the same small figures in Niger. On the contrary, ISGS notably increased its attacks in Burkina Faso and Niger, and also increased its attacks in Mali in 2020. However, the figures are still quite small compared to the previous two countries.

Figure 7: TVEO activities by year and country





In the Lake Chad Basin area among the G-5 Sahel countries, Boko Haram’s primary focus has shifted from Niger to Chad. The inverse is true for ISWAP.

### 2.3. Fatalities

While the total number of attacks increased by 21.5%, the number of fatalities also rose by 23.6% (from 1,312 to 1,622) which implies a slight increase in the *lethality*<sup>5</sup> of the attacks. The most significant surge in fatalities was produced in Mali in 2020. Chad also saw an important increase in fatalities, though the actual numbers still remain the lowest. Burkina Faso, though having the greatest number of fatalities during period B, is the only country where the number decreased, even though slightly.

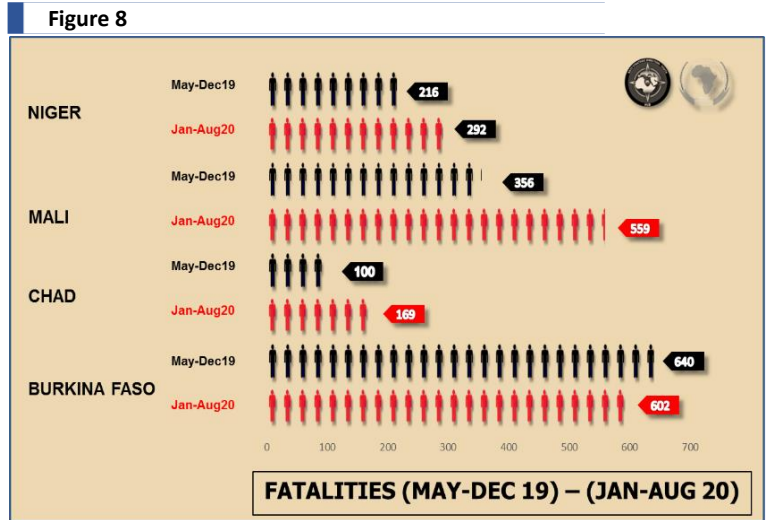
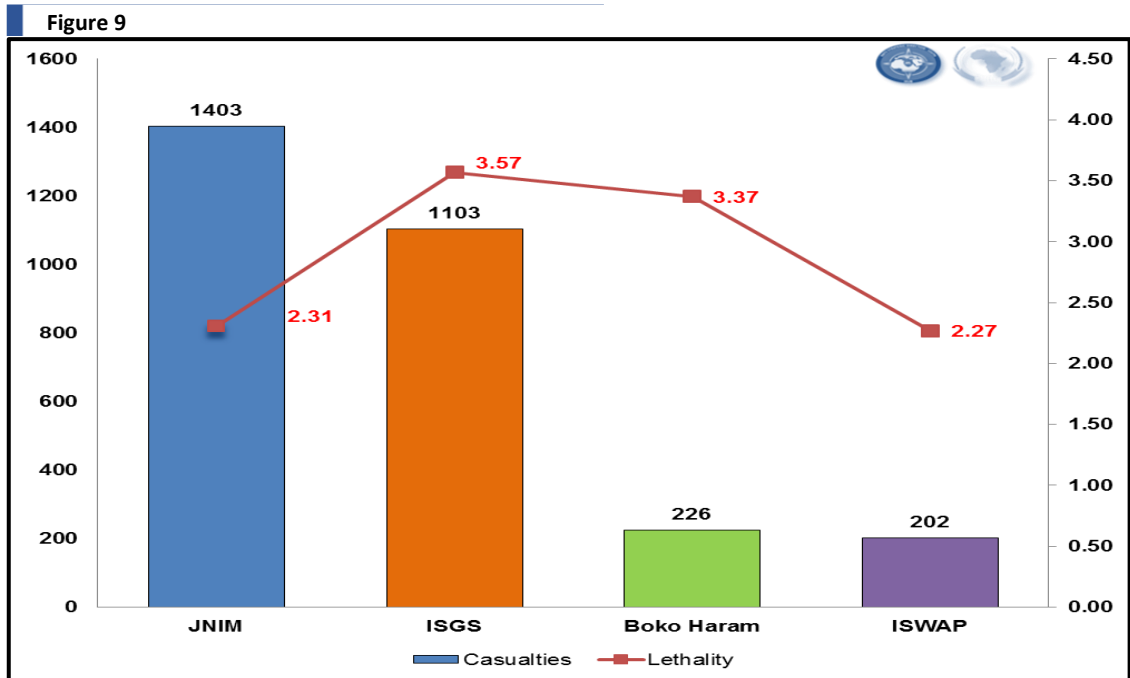


Figure 9 depicts both the total number of fatalities of each group and their lethality. JNIM caused the most fatalities and JNIM was the most lethal<sup>6</sup>.



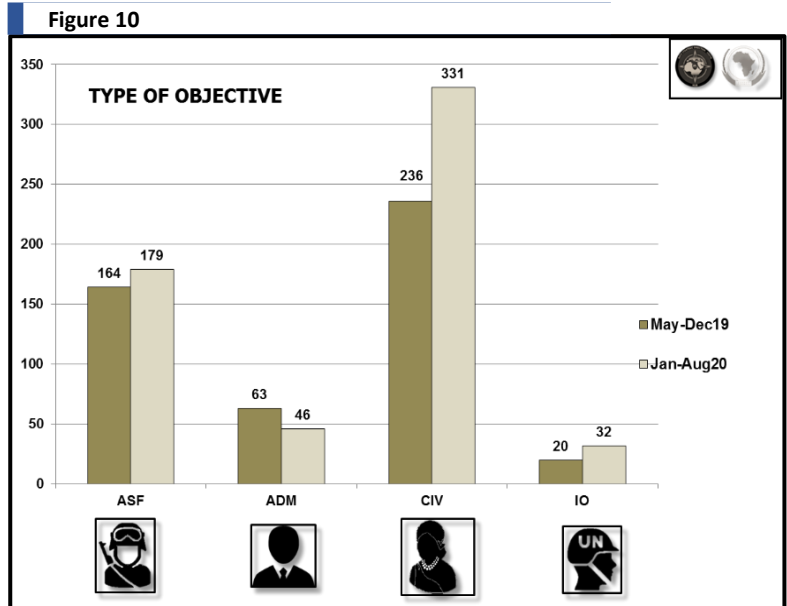
<sup>5</sup>For the purposes of these reports, the working definition of lethality is number of fatalities/number of attacks.

<sup>6</sup>Even though Boko Haram appears to be the most lethal terrorist group, this is mainly due to just one terrorist attack (101 fatalities).

### 2.4. Targets

Comparing the first two periods (see figure 10), majority of the targets and the greatest increase in the number of attacks are Civilian (CIV) throughout (+95).

Even if the figures are not so relevant (+11), the increase of attacks on International Organizations (IOs) is quite significant (+60%) during the period D. These attacks were mainly committed by JNIM (88%), which might represent a negative trend as it could indicate a change in strategy. On the other hand, the number of attacks against Administration targets (ADM) has decreased this year (-27).



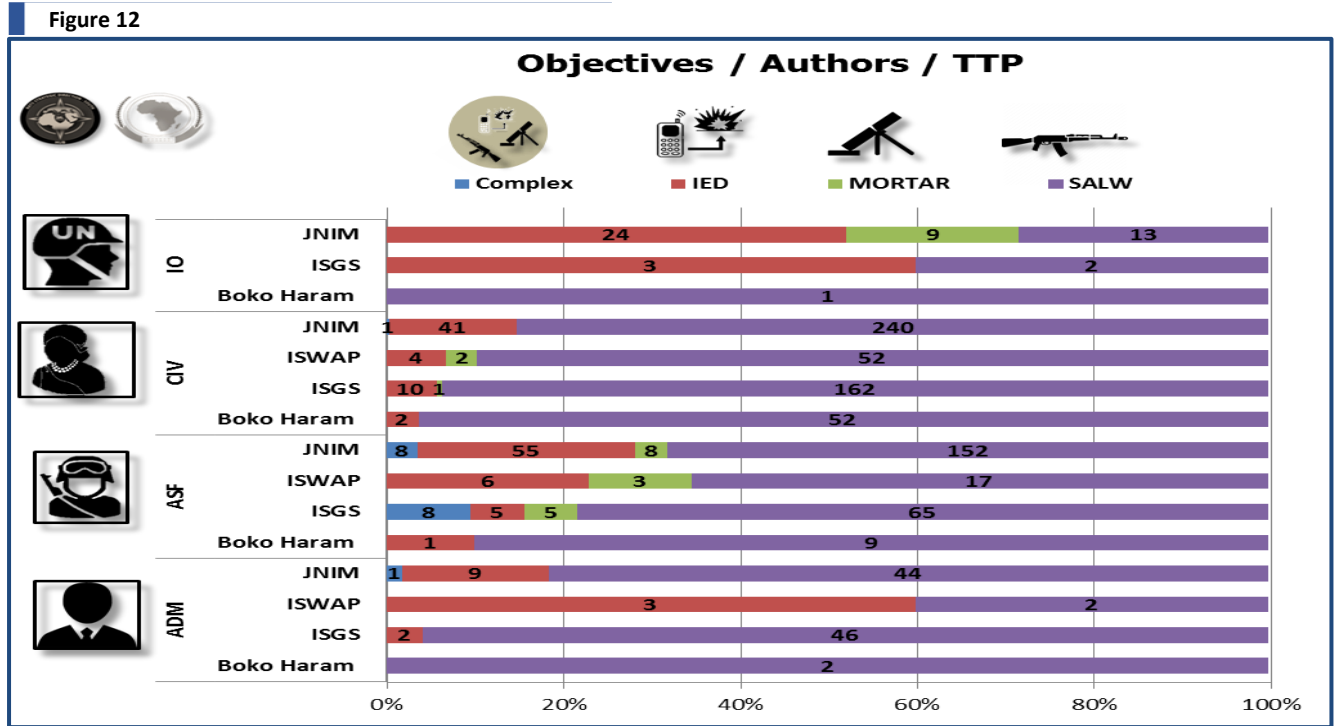
The graphic below incorporates all of the previous sets of data for 2020 and highlights the most lethal group per type of target. As stated, considering the number of attacks, all of the terrorist groups have prioritized CIV targets, except JNIM, which targeted both CIV and ADM.

Figure 11

TYPE OF OBJECTIVE	ASF	ADM	CIV	IO	
<b>JNIM</b>	<b>224</b> (426 FATALITIES)	<b>54</b> (45 FATALITIES)	<b>282</b> (903 FATALITIES)	<b>46</b> (29 FATALITIES)	<b>606</b> (1403 FATALITIES)
<b>ISGS</b>	<b>83</b> (453 FATALITIES)	<b>48</b> (47 FATALITIES)	<b>173</b> (602 FATALITIES)	<b>5</b> (1 FATALITIES)	<b>309</b> (1103 FATALITIES)
<b>BH</b>	<b>10</b> (125 FATALITIES)	<b>2</b> (3 FATALITIES)	<b>54</b> (96 FATALITIES)	<b>1</b> (2 FATALITIES)	<b>67</b> (226 FATALITIES)
<b>ISWAP</b>	<b>26</b> (112 FATALITIES)	<b>5</b> (1 FATALITIES)	<b>58</b> (89 FATALITIES)	<b>0</b> (0 FATALITIES)	<b>89</b> (202 FATALITIES)
	<b>343</b> (1116 FATALITIES)	<b>109</b> (96 FATALITIES)	<b>567</b> (1690 FATALITIES)	<b>52</b> (32 FATALITIES)	<b>1071</b> (2934 FATALITIES)

The number of casualties inflicted by JNIM increased during the period D, becoming the most relevant. JNIM is actually the most lethal in three of the four target categories (ADM, CIV and IO).

Figure 12 shows how most of the attacks against IOs were committed in the JNIM area of operations (mainly Mali and Burkina Faso) by using Improved Explosive Devices (IEDs).

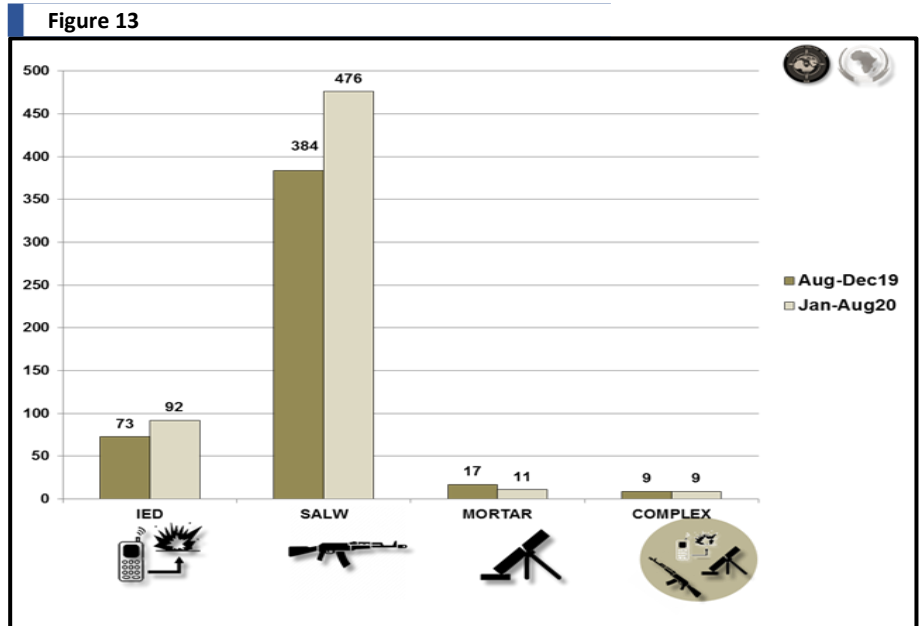


### 2.5. Tactics, Techniques and Procedures (TTPs)

Comparing the two periods, the overall data does not reveal any significant difference in TTPs employed by the terrorist groups. Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWs) are by far the most common, followed by IEDs.

Nevertheless, the next table shows how JNIM is conducting more complex and sophisticated attacks, while ISGS is focusing their attacks on SALWs TTPs.

The next graphic, relating to



2020, shows that SALWs also represent the first choice of each terrorist group, causing the most victims. Only JNIM and ISGS have carried out sophisticated and complex attacks, which were the most lethal (26 victims/attack).

Figure 14

TERRORIST ATTACKS MAY19-AUG20 BY TERRORIST GROUP AND TYPE OF ATTACK					
TYPE OF OBJECTIVE	IED	SALW	MORTAR	COMPLEX	
JNIM	129 (201 FATALITIES)	450 (1125 FATALITIES)	17 (1 FATALITIES)	10 (76 FATALITIES)	606 (1403 FATALITIES)
ISGS	20 (26 FATALITIES)	275 (864 FATALITIES)	6 (1 FATALITIES)	8 (212 FATALITIES)	309 (1103 FATALITIES)
BH	3 (12 FATALITIES)	64 (214 FATALITIES)	0 (0 FATALITIES)	0 (0 FATALITIES)	67 (226 FATALITIES)
ISWAP	13 (33 FATALITIES)	71 (169 FATALITIES)	5 (0 FATALITIES)	0 (0 FATALITIES)	89 (202 FATALITIES)
	165 (272 FATALITIES)	870 (2372 FATALITIES)	28 (2 FATALITIES)	18 (288 FATALITIES)	1071 (2934 FATALITIES)

According to this statistical data, the significant use of all four TTPs and the use of Complex attacks by JNIM, with particular attention to its increase in the use of IEDs, suggests its more advanced skills.

Figure 15: Number of JNIM attacks using IEDs



### 3. EVALUATION OF THE DATA – QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

#### 3.1 Number of terrorist attacks

2020 witnessed an increase in the overall number of TVEO attacks in Central Sahel compared to the previous year, but also some notable changes regarding the geographical distribution of violence.

In order to better highlight the spatial changes, the Central Sahel area was divided into four conventional sub-areas (hereinafter referred to as “circles”), as follows:

C = the central sector, roughly corresponding to the three-border area of Liptako Gourma;

M = overlapping with the Mopti region in Mali;

B = partially corresponding to the East region in Burkina Faso;

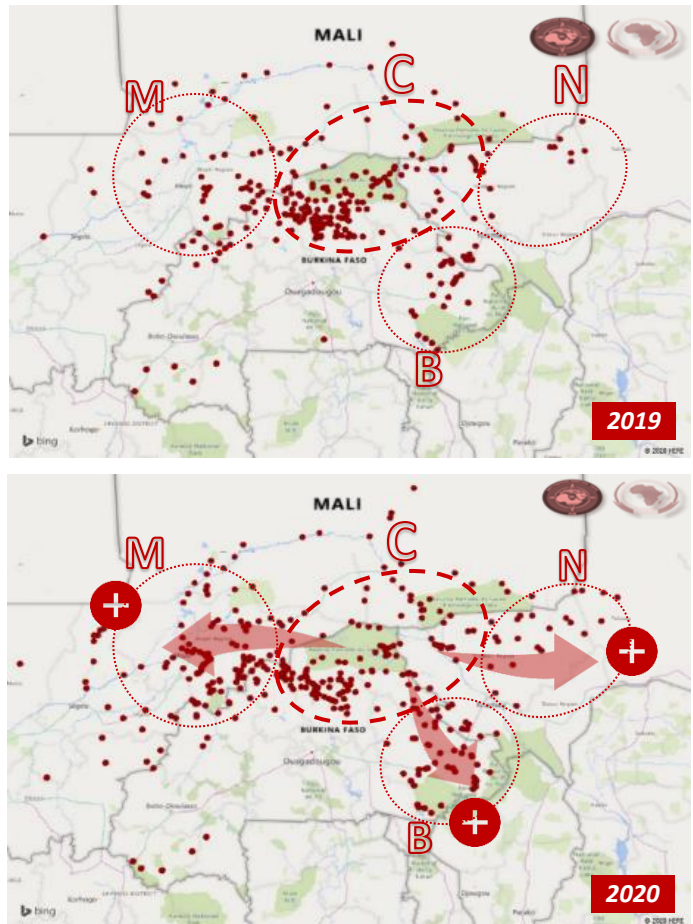
N = corresponding to western Niger.

It is indicated that Terrorists’ activities in circle C have somewhat decreased in 2020, while at the same time there is a notable increase in M, B and N circles, both in terms of number and geographical area. In spite of the slight deconcentration, the lack of state presence, the unaddressed grievances of the local communities and weak border control make the three-border area of Liptako Gourma a favorite ground for terrorist activity.

The differences between the TVEOs conduct in 2019 and 2020 is probably as a result of at least two categories of factors. Firstly, those based on deliberate decisions by, TVEOs to change their strategic and operational priorities. Secondly, those based on “migration”, which could be a forced reaction to the changing operational environmental conditions which forced the TVEOs to adopt alternative courses of action in order to endure. In the second category, two major factors are worthy of being highlighted.

**Security Forces Activity.** The high concentration of Operation Barkhane and the ASF operations in the C-circle during 2019-2020, has likely led to the reduction of TVEO activity in the area. In addition, the security architecture present in the Central Sahel has seen major adaptations during 2020. Initiated at the 13 January 2020 Pau summit, where the heads of states of France and the

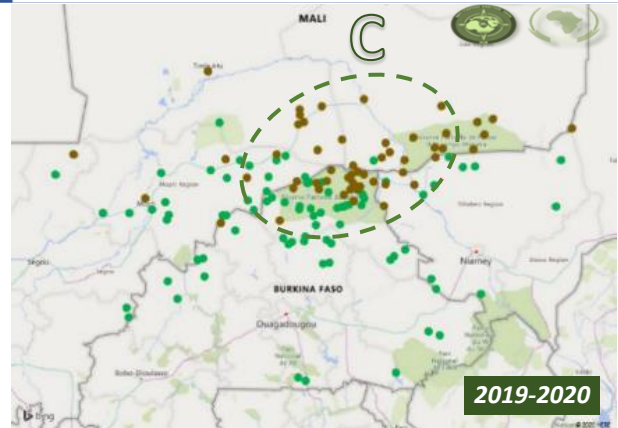
Figure 16: Terrorist attacks in Central Sahel



G5 Sahel countries renewed their commitment to continue the fight against terrorism, the most important operational developments are:

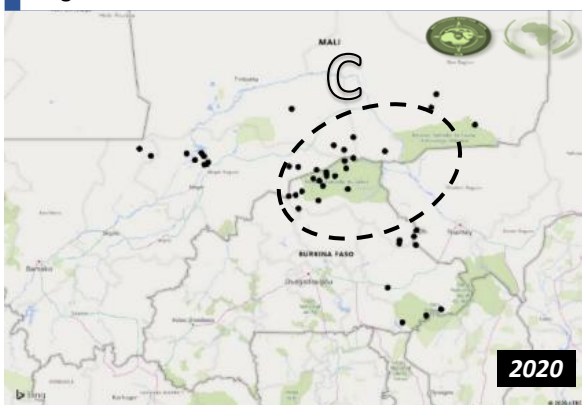
- The establishment of the Coalition for Sahel, which, on the military side, allowed for better coordination between Operation Barkhane and G5 Sahel Joint Forces through a Joint Command Mechanism.
- The reinforcement of Operation Barkhane with 600 additional French soldiers, bringing the total to 5,100.
- The establishment of Operation Takuba within Operation Barkhane, which brings together Special Operations Forces from European countries which reached its initial operational capacity in July, 2020.

Figure 17: Operation Barkhane and ASF activity



The results are demonstrated by Operation Barkhane's increased operational tempo in 2020 compared to 2019. According to the ACLED database, at least 578 TVEO members have been killed in 2020 by French-led operations, marking a massive increase from only 129 in 2019. Out of the 578, most of the neutralized militants (411) belonged to ISGS. At the same time, the ASF from Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso increased their operational tempo, with 329 militants neutralized in Central Sahel in 2020, against 161 in 2019.

Figure 18: JNIM – ISGS Clashes



**JNIM – ISGS Conflict:** Another potential cause for somewhat reduced activity in the C-circle can be attributed to clashes between JNIM and ISGS, hence diverting combat resources towards these confrontations. The disagreements between JNIM and the ISGS, observed in the previous report, continued throughout 2020, leading to at least 354 militants from both sides being killed in 59 documented incidents. After years of cohabitation and even cooperation, the positive relationship between the two groups broke down in early 2020,

when information regarding alleged talks between the Government of Mali and JNIM was confirmed by both sides. Apart from being sidelined from the peace talks, ISGS is formally considered the primary target of military operations by French and the G5 Sahel troops, which results in JNIM and ISGS acting from different positions.

In the countries in the **Lake Chad** area – Niger and Chad - the activity of ISWAP and Boko Haram is very much less, compared to the Central Sahel cluster, and has been relatively constant during the last two years (77 attacks in 2019 and 80 attacks in 2020). With 113 of the 157 attacks occurring in

its territory during 2019-2020, Niger was significantly more affected by terrorism than Chad. The discrepancy could be explained by the differences in the security domain between the two countries. First, the Chadian military is seen as superior to that of Niger, in both size and expertise. Secondly, while Niger is fighting terrorism on two fronts, there is no other quite significant source of insecurity on Chadian territory, which allows it to direct more security resources to the Lake Chad region. Lastly, the density of the security forces is higher in the Lake Chad region due to the proximity of the capital N'Djamena. The relatively low levels of activity in the Lake Chad cluster, however, are not a measure for ISWAP or Boko Haram overall capacity, since most of their activity occurs in the north-eastern part of Nigeria.

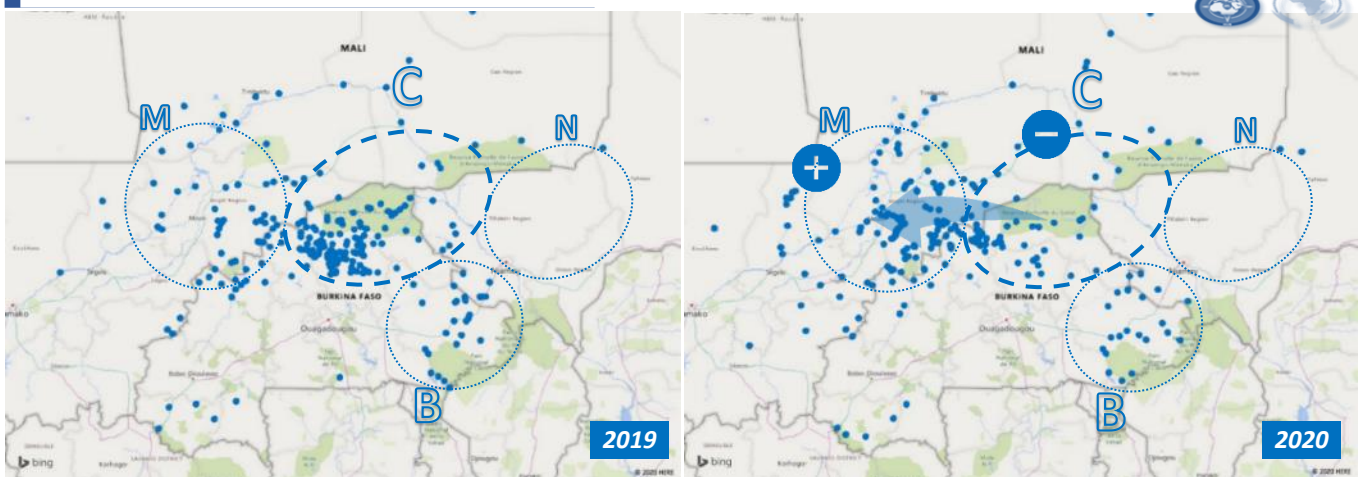
### Attacks in the cross-border areas

The armed terrorist groups operating in the Sahel are persistently launching attacks in the tri-border regions of the three affected countries (Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger) due to the strategic location which makes it easy for terrorists to launch attacks in one territory and retreat to another.

- Due to issues of sovereignty, it is difficult for the security services in one country to pursue terrorists across the border.
- Little or no state presence: There is weak state presence around the tri-border territories, thus making them the weakest link in the fight against terrorism, which is capitalized on by terrorists to occupy and conduct attacks.
- Marginalization of the communities in the area. In addition to being poor, some of these communities are at times victims of abuse at the hands of state security services. This, therefore, makes them sympathetic to terrorist groups and susceptible to terrorist recruitment.
- The presence of the “*Réserve sylvo-pastorale et partielle de faune du Sahel*”, in northern Burkina Faso makes it very easy for terrorists to hide after launching attacks.

### 3.2. Terrorist activity by groups

Figure 19: JNIM Activity in the Central Sahel

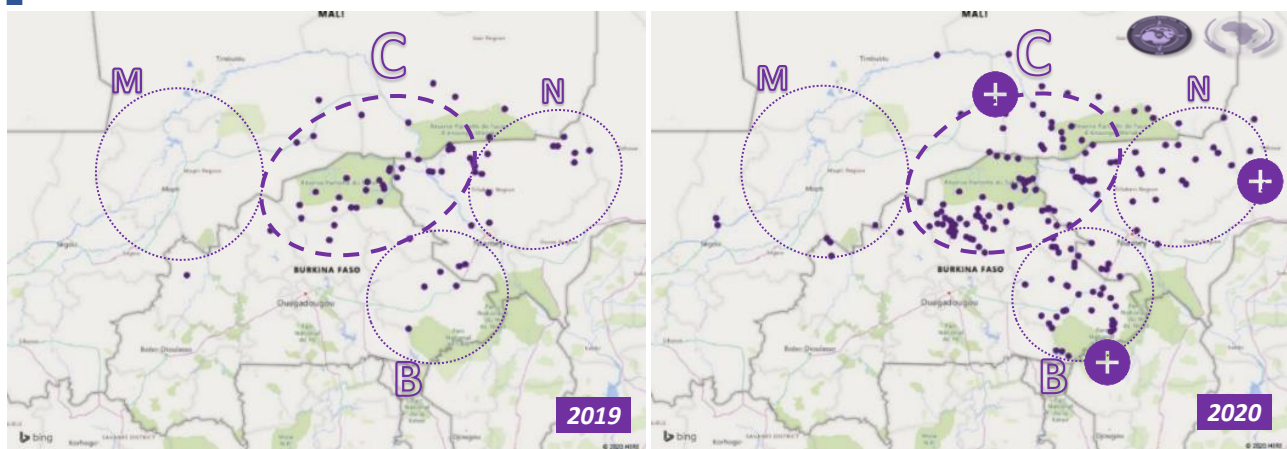


2020 has seen **JNIM** decreasing its attacks in Burkina Faso and increasing them in Mali, in what could be regarded as a refocus from C-circle (Liptako Gourma) to M-circle (Mopti region in Mali). The shift is most likely attributable to the Macina Liberation Front (MLF)/Katiba Macina, the JNIM's spearhead formation in Central Mali. In recent years, the MLF, largely composed of Fulani militants from the Mopti region in Mali, has gradually advanced its operations through Fulani ethnic lines further south in Burkina Faso. However, the 2020 "return" to Mopti represents a significant development, which was likely determined by a combination of the following:

- **Loss of the Fulani support in Burkina Faso.** The admission by MLF leader, Amadou Kuffa, of the existence of talks with the Malian government, was reportedly not well received by some Fulani. In a community long marginalized in both Mali and Burkina Faso, reconciliation with the central government was considered unacceptable by some, who chose to follow the more appealing radical ISGS line.
- **Avoidance of confrontation with Operation Barkhane and ASF.** JNIM is arguably a more mature organization than ISGS when it comes to defining and pursuing long term strategic goals. JNIM is probably aware that the mounting pressure from the security forces in the Liptako Gourma region would eventually lead to an uneven confrontation, so it might have preferred to refocus its operations in the friendlier Mopti region, where the MLF has its stronghold. Moreover, JNIM has experienced such a situation previously. The strategic TVEO retreat into northern Mali during the 2013-2014 French Operation Serval allowed them to survive and subsequently recover and, from 2015, to expand from their strongholds into central Mali and later into the entire Central Sahel.
- Focus on domestic operations with the purpose of **strengthening the JNIM position in the context of talks** with the Malian government.
- **Avoid unnecessary loses** in confrontations with ISGS.



Figure 20: ISGS Activity in the Central Sahel



There has been a dramatic increase in **ISGS** activity in 2020 compared to 2019, although this is largely attributable to the intense activity recorded earlier in the year. The growth in ISGS attacks throughout 2020 is clearly observable in C, B, and N-circles. In the C-circle, ISGS has likely exploited the defections of Fulani militants from the MLF (JNIM), by enrolling them into its ranks. In the other areas, the increase in activity is a natural result of the expansionist nature of ISGS, which is mainly focused on territorial gains and less concerned about constructing mechanisms of informal governance.

The ISGS expansion was significant in Burkina Faso and Niger, but to a lesser extent in Mali, where the consolidated presence of various armed actors, including the rival JNIM and other armed groups such as the coalition of CMA and Platform, makes such attempts prohibitive. At the same time, the ISGS expansion towards Niger could be driven by more practical reasons, such as to gain control over smuggling activities, particularly arms and other contraband goods, between the coastal states of Ghana, Togo and Benin to landlocked countries, particularly Niger. However, in spite of its high yearly averages, the decreasing trends in ISGS activity, starting with March 2020, highlight the group's mounting difficulties in simultaneously confronting the national and international security forces, as well as JNIM.

In the Lake Chad region, **ISWAP** appeared to shift its focus towards Niger in 2020 by increasing its number of attacks there, while at the same time reducing its activity in Chad, compared to the previous year. During the same periods, **Boko Haram** did the opposite, by doubling its number of attacks in Chad and reducing its activity in Niger in 2020. However, the period D has seen a reduction in the activity of both groups in Chad, with only 10 attacks recorded between May and August 2020. This is likely the result of the sustained Chadian counterterrorist campaign in the Lake Chad basin, initiated in the aftermath of the 23 March, 2020 attack in which Boko Haram militants killed 98 Chadian soldiers. The most significant military action was Operation Boma Wrath, launched in April, 2020 and directly commanded by Chad President, Idris Deby Itno, who claimed it had killed 1,000 jihadists and eradicated Boko Haram from Chadian territory.

### 3.3. Fatalities and Targets

The reduced fatalities in Burkina Faso in 2020 (period C and D) compared to the previous year are likely the result of the relative decongestion in the C-circle (Liptako Gourma). In this region, however, the relative void left by JNIM was quickly filled by ISGS, so the actual decrease is not substantial.

The increased numbers in Mali reflect the refocus of the MLF operations on the Mopti region, while the ISGS expansion in Niger naturally led to an increment in casualties. **CIV** have been the most common target for TVEO attacks throughout 2020. In the Central Sahel, 826 civilians lost their lives in terrorist attacks during the first 8 months of the year, most of them in Burkina Faso (418) and Mali (350). In

the Lake Chad basin, most of the terrorist attacks involved civilians, although the security forces suffered the most casualties. JNIM records the highest count of CIV killed (442) in 2020, most of them being in Mali (301). This represents a shift from 2019, when most of the JNIM inflicted CIV victims were from Burkina Faso. The change from 2019 to 2020 came as a direct result of the MLF refocusing its attention on Mopti, where it increased its violent engagements with the non-Fulani communities in the region, especially the Dogon. Consequently, 61 of the 76 JNIM attacks against CIV in Mali were directed against the Dogon, which resulted in 274 Dogon being killed out of the total death toll of 301.

In this particular situation, the explanation for the increase in violence against CIV has more to do with ethnic fractures than with ideological motivations. In Mopti, the pastoralist-dominant Fulani community, from which the MLF recruits most of its members, has been involved in deadly intercommunal conflicts for years with the Dogon living in the border region with Burkina Faso in the so-called “Dogon Land”. In the context of the ethnically motivated spirals of violence in Mopti, JNIM (through MLF) is just one of the actors. In addition, the Fulani militias, the Dan Na Ambassagou and Dogon self-defense groups, have been very active and equally aggressive. For instance, 68 Dogon ethnics and 41 Fulanis lost their lives in 41 documented intercommunal clashes between May and August, 2020.

Figure 21: Civilian deaths from JNIM and ISGS attacks

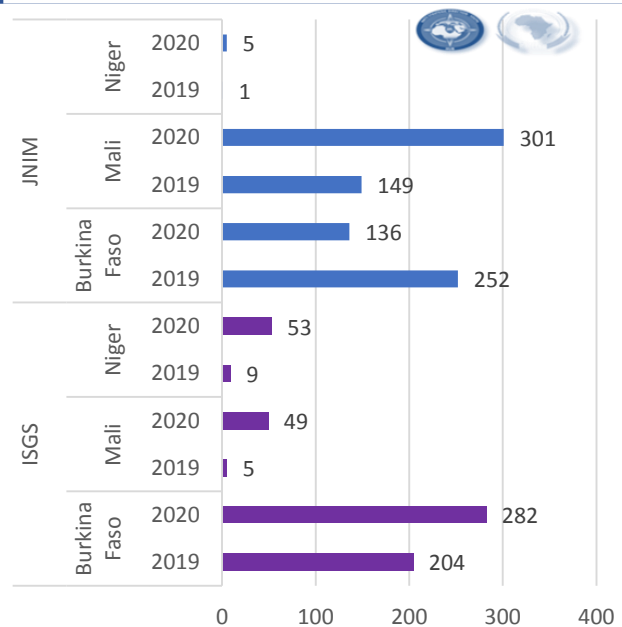
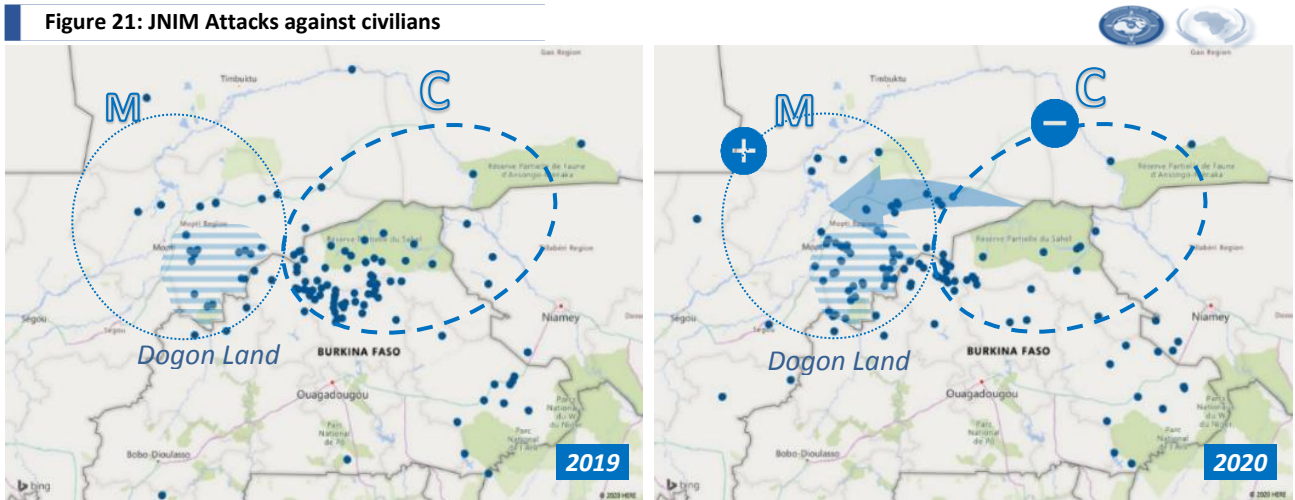


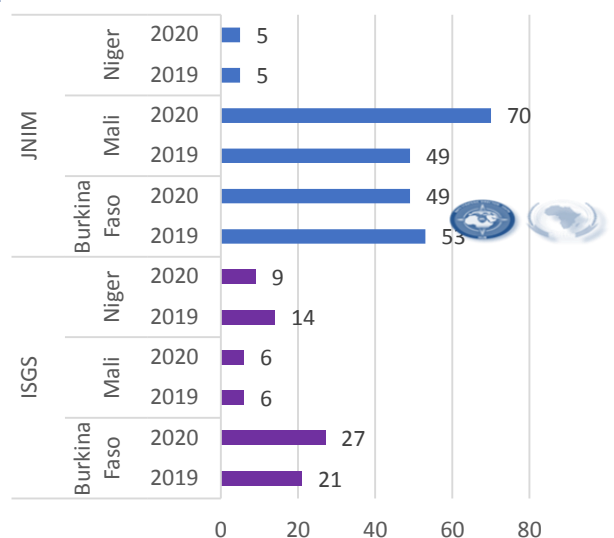
Figure 21: JNIM Attacks against civilians



The violent MLF campaign against the Dogon in 2020 seems to have had favorable results. As of October 2020, with the Fulani seeming to prevail, several Dogon communities from Koro circle (Mopti), in opposition to the Dan Na Ambassagou line, have virtually surrendered by sealing peace agreements with the MLF. If the Dogon submission trend continues, the MLF would record an essential victory by eliminating its major non-state armed group opponent in Central Mali. ISGS has increased its attacks against CIV in all three countries in the Central Sahel in 2020, but as with the previous year, its focus remains on Burkina Faso. Similar to JNIM’s MLF, ISGS traditionally heavily recruits from the Fulani communities in Sahel and eastern regions of Burkina Faso, Menaka region in Mali and Tillaberi in Niger. However, unlike the MLF, deeply rooted in the Fulani community in Mopti, the ISGS bases its expansion on exploiting the fault lines between the Fulani on one side and the central states and competing ethnic groups on the other. In Burkina Faso, for instance, ISGS has found real ground for recruitment in the Sahel and the eastern regions, where the majority of the population is made of disenfranchised Fulani and Fulani-related Gourmanche ethnic groups. Reportedly, in exchange for their loyalty, the ISGS affiliated Fulanis are being allowed a higher degree of freedom by ISGS leadership to sort out their domestic issues with other cohabiting groups such as Mossi and Foulse. At the same time, it seems that the expansion of ISGS into new territories brings with it retaliation against some locals who are thought to be JNIM loyalists or who are suspected of supporting the security forces, which may add to the reason for the increase in the number of the CIV killed.

ASF continue to represent an important target for the TVEOs, especially for JNIM, who conducted the most attacks both in 2019 and 2020. Confirming the general trend highlighted previously, JNIM seems to prioritize Mali also when it comes to confronting the ASF, with the attacks increasing from 49 in 2019 to 70 in 2020, and fatalities from 71 to 188. In Burkina Faso, the JNIM attacks against ASF have seen a slight

Figure 22: JNIM and ISGS attacks against ASF



reduction in 2020 compared to the previous year in both frequency and associated casualties. The increased targeting of ASF in Mali in 2020, which confirms both of these observations and the predictions from the previous quarterly report, could be motivated by the necessity to strengthen its position in the peace talks with the Malian government.

In the Lake Chad region, the ASF suffered the most casualties in all categories, especially in Chad where, in 2020 alone, 144 servicemen lost their lives in confrontations with Boko Haram and ISWAP. The emphasis that both groups put on the ASF is likely a response to the ongoing counterterrorist operations conducted by the riparian states, both on the national level and as part of the MNJTF.

**International Organizations:** The attacks on IO have mostly occurred in Mali, since the high density of international responders offers increased targeting possibilities. A vast majority of these attacks have been performed by the JNIM against MINUSMA and Operation Barkhane, while ISGS has shown little appetite for violent engagements with IO. Despite an increase in numbers from 17 in 2019 to 28 in 2020, the JNIM attacks have shown reduced efficiency in 2020, with only 3 members of the IO losing their lives. JNIM appetite for targeting IOs is motivated by at least two factors. Firstly, in the absence of state authorities, JNIM uses informal governance to control vast territories, especially in northern Mali. In the context, the presence of IOs, whose purpose is to partially substitute and to eventually facilitate the return of the state in the ungoverned spaces, represent a direct threat to the JNIM informal authority. Secondly, JNIM has always opposed the presence of IOs since they are seen as supporters of the Malian government, with who the JNIM - including its predecessors - has been in open conflict since 2012.

### 3.4. Tactics, Techniques and Procedures (TTPs)

SALW remain the main TTP employed by TVEOs, because it requires the least expertise, and because they are sufficient to match the soft nature of most of the targets (e.g., CIV). IED attacks are mainly employed by JNIM, this option being driven by their increased inclination to engage ASF and IO, which are usually better protected targets. Additionally, the employment of IEDs on a large scale is facilitated by the superior JNIM expertise compared to other groups.

Complex attacks remain rare and were only recorded in the Central Sahel cluster. Although their low frequency may indicate a relative

#### ATTACKS AT MAJOR ROADS AND RIVERS

In order to frustrate the security services and also maximize casualties, TVEOs deliberately target these main roads, particularly with IEDs.

Terrorists also launch attacks around rivers in order to ward off security personnel and take control of the water sources for their own needs, as water scarcity is a common problem in the area.

Subsequently, the terrorists also tax the local communities for their access to the water supply, thereby becoming a source of revenue.

Due to the countries being landlocked, the security services are ill-trained and ill-equipped logistically to enable them to pursue terrorists across bodies of water.

inability of the TVEOs to perform such difficult tasks, the successes recorded by JNIM and ISGS in several complex attacks denote that they have sufficient capacity for planning and execution. For instance, two ISGS complex attacks on 10 December 2019 and 9 January 2020 caused 160 deaths in the ranks of the Nigerien army, although 77 militants were also killed in the process. More recently, a complex JNIM attack on 14 June 2020 against a Malian army convoy ended with 24 soldiers being killed.

**3.5 Brief summary of each terrorist group**

The table below summarizes the most pertinent data relating to each terrorist group.

<b>JNIM</b>
<p>The most active terrorist group in the Sahel.                  Operates in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger.                  Reduced its activity in Burkina Faso in 2020, focusing them on southern Mali.                  Caused the greatest number of fatalities in the region.                  The highest level of expertise; it is the group that most uses IEDs.                  Main objectives are state structures (ASF and ADM).                  The most active attacking IOs.</p>
<b>ISGS</b>
<p>The second most active terrorist group.                  Had the highest lethality (3.6).                  Operates in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger.                  The main TVEO operating in eastern Burkina Faso and western Niger.                  Considerable number of losses during 2020 due to fighting against Op. Barkhane, ASF and JNIM.                  In 2020, expanded to the south of Burkina Faso and the west of Niger.</p>
<b>BOKO HARAM</b>
<p>Operates in Niger and Chad.                  The most lethal in Lake Chad area.                  Its activity remained more or less stable.                  In 2020, increased its attacks in Chad, reducing them in Niger.                  By number of attacks, the main objective is CIV.                  Main TPP is SALW.</p>
<b>ISWAP</b>
<p>Operates in Niger and Chad.                  The most active in Lake Chad area.                  Its activity remained more or less stable.                  In 2020, increased its attacks in Niger, reducing them in Chad.                  By number of attacks and fatalities, the main objective is CIV.                  Main TTP is SALW.</p>

## 4. CONCLUSIONS AND ASSESSMENT

The **security situation** in the Sahel continues to degrade, a reality reflected by the increase in violent acts and associated casualties. Terrorism remains a major source of insecurity, but it often overlaps with other types of conflicts, creating complex situations of insecurity where it becomes difficult to distinguish the actors and to assess their individual impact. In the Central Sahel, where the operational environment is populated by a plethora of TVEOs, self-defense groups, militia and political armed groups, the boundaries between the actors are unclear and assigning overall insecurity to one category alone is difficult.

In the **Central Sahel**, the enhanced efforts of the international and national security forces appear to deliver promising results, demonstrated by a tiny but still visible de-escalation of terrorist violence in the Liptako Gourma region. At the same time, partially dislodged from the center, the terrorist groups seem to have somewhat migrated towards more peripheral areas in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, where marginalization and economic hardship of the local communities create a breeding ground for the perpetuation of terrorist activities. Recent moves to the south of Burkina Faso could be understood as an intent to expand their footprint towards the coastal states of Ghana, Togo and Benin to facilitate, in coherence with other terrorism/criminal organizations, the control of the main smuggling routes (particularly arms and other contraband goods) to landlocked countries, particularly Niger.

The advancement of the **talks between JNIM** and the **government of Mali** is critical to the evolution of security in the Sahel. With little official information available at the moment, and with contrasting actions and attitudes from both sides, the outcome of the talks is anything but certain. The position of the new Malian political leadership towards the peace talks initiated during the regime of former president Keita is still unclear. An eventual positive outcome, where JNIM would cease hostilities, would likely be one of the most important changes in Mali and the Sahel in almost a decade of violence.

In the **Lake Chad basin**, Boko Haram and ISWAP proved to be highly resilient when facing national and multinational counterterrorist efforts. Although Niger and Chad are not primary targets for the Lake Chad terrorist groups, their attacks are a supplementary burden for the already limited security resources.

The increase of terrorist activity towards southern **Burkina Faso** poses significant challenges for the **Gulf of Guinea** countries such as **Ghana, Togo and Benin**. However, the success would be dependent on how the terrorist groups will manage to exploit the local conditions to their benefit. Finally, the **Covid-19** pandemic has already generated negative effects in the economic and security domains. The economic downturn is likely to affect the defense budget and aggravate the socioeconomic conditions, thus creating favorable conditions for terrorism to flourish. At the same time, health concerns may lead to restrictions of movement for the security forces, which would translate into an increased operational freedom for the terrorist groups.

## **ANNEX A: DEFINITIONS AND CONCEPTS<sup>7</sup>**

**Terrorist and Violent Extremist Organization (TVEO):** For the purposes of this report they are considered as those organizations which justify, support or use violence to achieve any terrorism or extremist goal (normally Political, Social, Religious or Ideological).

**Terrorist attack:** all those facts consisting of the unlawful use or threatened use of force or violence, instilling fear and terror, which may endanger the life, physical integrity or freedom, or causes serious injury or death to individuals, group of people or property in an attempt to coerce or intimidate governments or societies, or to gain control over a population, to achieve political, religious or ideological objectives.

Excluded are other violent acts. For example riots, violent demonstrations, security forces raids, etc. Although ethnical/tribal conflicts can cause a great number of victims among the civilian population, these issues are not terrorist attacks. This in no way diminishes the importance of ethnic/tribal conflicts in regional security.

**Terrorist group:** those terrorist organizations defined by the UN Agreement (UN Sanctions Committee List 1267/1988), as well as those considered as such by ACSRT (in accordance with AU definition of terrorist acts) and the Hub (based on criteria such as claims, motivations, the ends pursued and the means employed, etc.)

**Fatalities:** the number of deaths caused by the terrorist attacks, excluding terrorist fatalities.

**Targets:** the types of targets considered are Armed and Security Forces (ASF), Administrative personnel and facilities (ADM), Civilians (CIV) and International Organizations (IO).

**Tactics, Techniques And Procedures (TTP):** the TTPs included are Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW), explosives or IEDs, Mortars and Complex Attacks (combining two or more TTPs).

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<sup>7</sup> In order to avoid controversy and to integrate the majority of existing sensitivities, the joint analysis team have agreed on the definitions included in this annex. These definitions are solely for the purposes of this report. All of the statistical data and graphics used in this document are in accordance with the above mentioned definitions and concepts.







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2020-08

# 2 nd Joint NSD-S HUB & ACRST Four-Monthly Report “Terrorism in the Sahel: facts and figures”

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